

Five Vessels from the McFate Site, Crawford County, Pennsylvania

By James L. Murphy*

ABSTRACT

Five vessels excavated at the McFate Site (36 CW 1), a large Late Prehistoric village along French Creek, near Cochranon, Crawford County, Pennsylvania, are in the collection of the Crawford County Historical Society at Meadville, Pennsylvania. These are the first vessels to be described from the McFate Site which was extensively excavated in 1938 under the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Of particular interest are two vessels of Mayer-Oakes' (1955) McFate Incised ceramic type which was named for this site. The other vessels are not assigned to formal ceramic types, though one (E 250) fits Mayer-Oakes' Monongahela Punctate type.

THE extensive, multi-component McFate Site (36 Cw 1) lies along French Creek near Cochranon, Crawford County, Pennsylvania. Excavation conducted by Harry Schoff in 1938 revealed three overlapping stockade patterns, and there may have been as many as five (Brown, 1971), indicating considerable time depth to this Late Prehistoric site. Schoff prepared a manuscript report on the McFate site, but this has never been published. In his report, the original of which is in the William Penn Museum, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, Schoff devoted little space to description and discussion of the ceramics.

The bulk of the McFate collections obtained by Schoff are in storage at the William Penn Memorial Museum and have been only cursorily studied. A relatively small portion of the collection, however, was deposited at the Meadville Public Library, Meadville, Pennsylvania, and has since been placed in the Crawford County Historical Society's museum at the Baldwin-Reynolds House in Meadville.

The precise temporal relationships of the five vessels housed in the Baldwin-Reynolds Museum remain uncertain. All were excavated from features either in the overlapping zone of the central and eastern stockade patterns or just outside the edge of the central stockade. It is presumed that all of the vessels, with the

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possible exception of the single grit-tempered pot (E 250), belonged to the same component which is guesstimated at A.D. 1300-1400 and which is believed to be at least roughly contemporaneous with the late component at the Lyman Site (33 La 2), Lake County, Ohio (Murphy 1971a), and slightly earlier than the major component at the Wilson Shutes Site (36 Cw 5), Crawford County, Pennsylvania.

The two most important vessels (Fig. 1; Fig. 2a, b, d, e) are the first illustrated representatives of William Mayer-Oakes' (1955) tentative McFate Incised ceramic type, though several vessels and rimsherds from other sites have been assigned to McFate Incised and illustrated (Butler 1939, Fig. 2a; Dragoo 1955, Pls. 13-15; Murphy 1971a, Fig. 8a, c-e; Murphy 1971b, Fig. 9b; Murphy

1972, Pl. 1, Fig. 1-6, 9m-u). Some controversy (Johnson 1972) has arisen regarding the relationship of certain incised ceramics from "Whittlesey Focus" sites of northeastern Ohio with "true" McFate Incised ware from northwestern Pennsylvania. This question has been discussed at some length elsewhere (Murphy 1972) and will not be given further notice here, except to reaffirm my contention that the shell-tempered ceramics with opposed incised motifs from the Lyman Site (Murphy 1971a) are more closely related to McFate Incised than to any "Whittlesey Focus" ceramics. Similarly, usually grit-tempered, incised, cordmarked sherds which have been referred to as Reeve Opposed (Fitting 1964) are also believed to be closely related and, for all practical purposes, typologically identical with McFate Incised. The

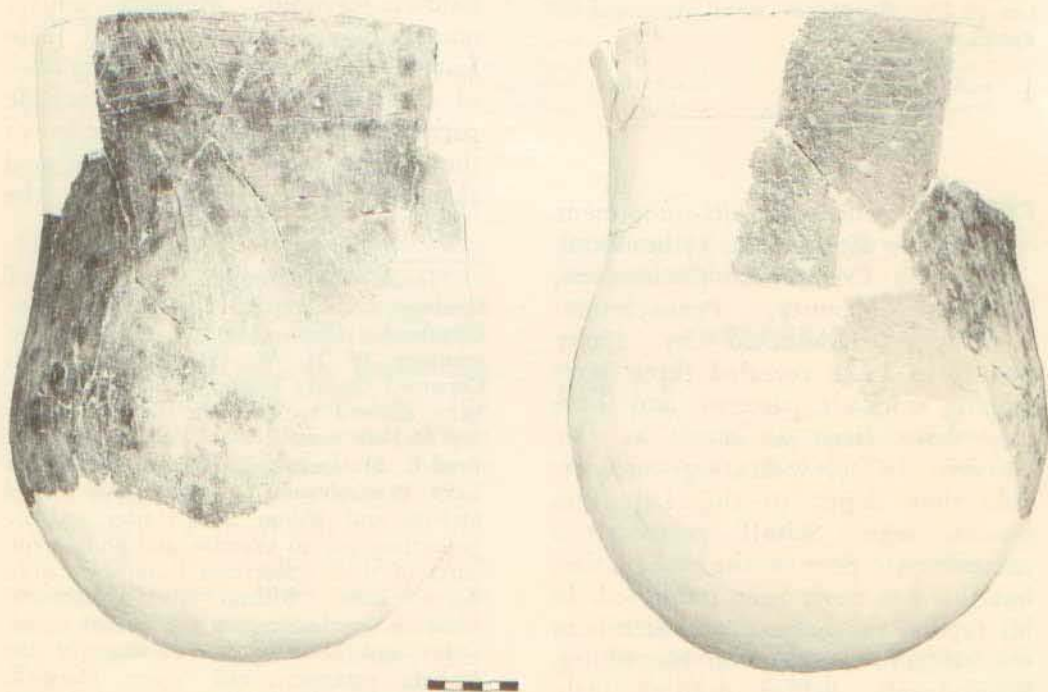


Fig. 1. Two Views of vessel 1 (E 440). Mayer-Oakes' McFate Incised ceramic type. All figure scales are in centimeters.

limited material available suggests that a horizontal incising element may be slightly less common at the Ohio components from which McFate Incised has been reported, but even this minor distinction, certainly not one of great typological importance, has not yet been adequately demonstrated.

Vessel 1 (E 440) from the Baldwin-Reynolds Museum (Fig. 1) is a large, shell tempered pot with an elongated globular form and very slightly expanding rim, completely identical in form with much Monogahela ware from the type "Monyock" area of southwestern Pennsylvania. The vessel is 295 mm high and has a diameter at the lip of 216 mm. Thickness of the vessel wall varies from 4 mm to 6 mm. The incised rim area is unthickened and in no way distinguished from the smooth surfaced, slightly concave neck and the body, other than by the finely incised ornamentation. This incising is very fine and carefully applied, presenting an almost stamped appearance. The decoration consists of alternating series of 5-6 opposed oblique lines separated by a series of 5-7 horizontal lines which were added subsequent to the oblique incising. The lip of the vessel is flat, plain (uncordmarked) and ornamented with rather fine, regular diagonal incised lines, spaced from 2-9 mm apart. This vessel came from Pit 139 which also contained an antler comb, a triangular flint point, and a turkey bone awl.

The second McFate Incised vessel (E 1195) is smaller, less elongated, and cordmarked with cruder, more irregular incising, and has a slightly thickened rim (Fig. 2a, b, d, e). It was found with Burial 10. This shell-tempered bowl is 165 mm high and 143 mm in diameter. Thickness of the

body wall ranges from 6-7 mm and that of the rim from 7-8 mm. The cordmarking is distinct on the exterior surface except at the base, with most of the cordmarking being nearly vertical on the rim and neck areas. The flattened lip is distinctly cordmarked. The incised rim motif is similar to that on Vessel 1, but there are only three incised lines in the oblique opposed and horizontal elements. Careful scrutiny of the ornamentation suggests that the design was formed by dragging or drawing a stylus across the wet clay rather than by true incising or cutting with a straight edge as was probably the method used on the larger McFate Incised vessel. The relative fineness of the ornamentation on this cordmarked McFate Incised bowl varies considerably, the oblique lines tending to be narrower than the horizontal lines. It is also apparent that both series of oblique lines were made in zig zag fashion before the horizontal series was added to the vessel. Reconstruction of the precise order in which these series of inscribed lines were added to the vessel may seem a comparatively trivial exercise, but in this particular instance it indicates that the potter conceived of the design in a particular fashion; i.e., as a multiple zig zag motif on a background of multiple horizontal incised lines, rather than as, say, a series of triangles filled with horizontal lines and separated by oblique multiple lines. Precisely the same concept is evidenced on Lyman Site vessels (Murphy 1972, Fig. 9) referred to as McFate Incised. Similar motifs, where found in Susquehannock ceramics, tend to be more complicated, but the same sequence of design application is apparent on at least one Funk Incised vessel (Kinsey and Graybill 1971, Fig. 10i).

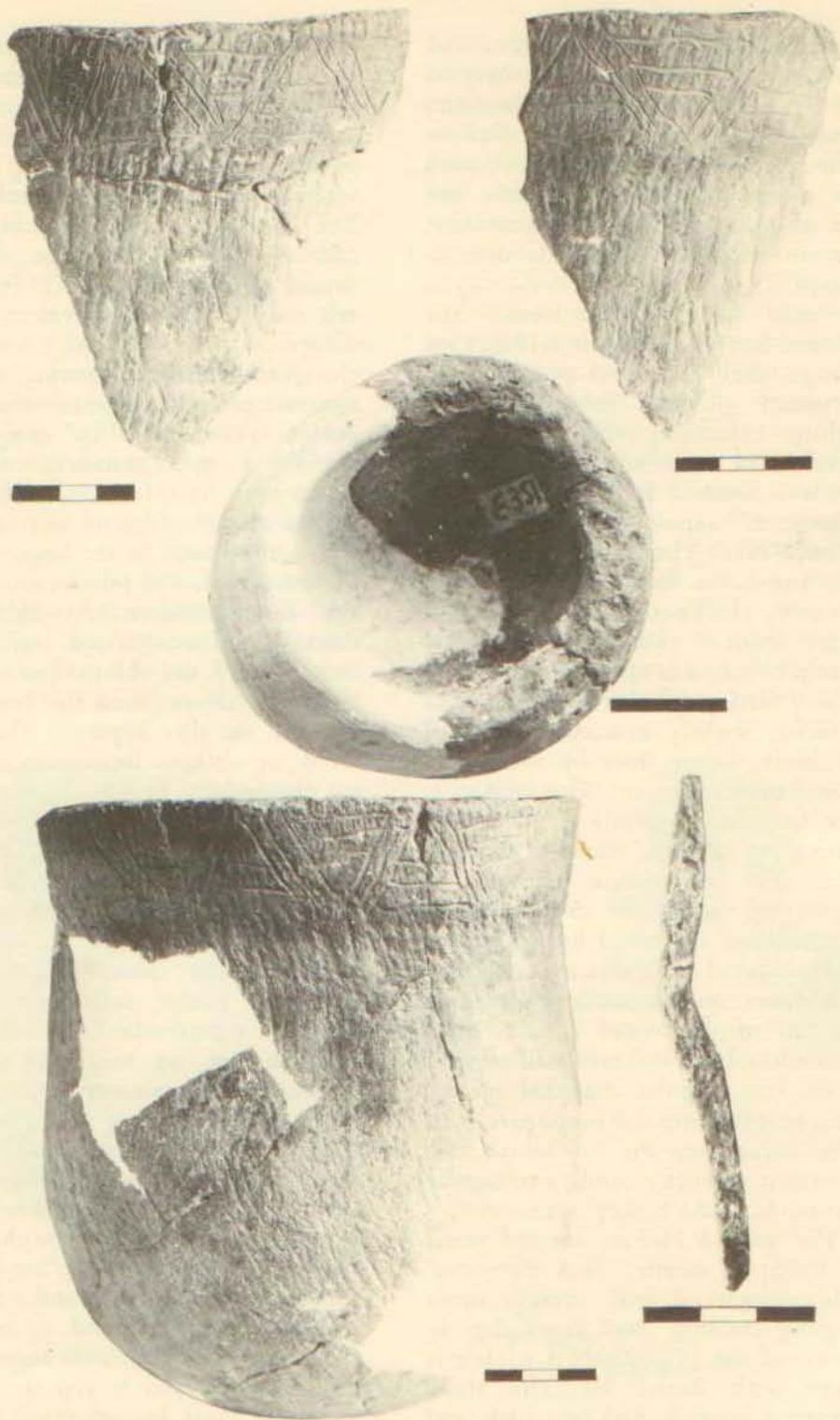


Fig. 2.a-e. (a, b) Two sherds from the restored McFate vessel, (d) the restored McFate vessel, (c) shell tempered McFate toy pot (E 351), and (e) a rim profile of another McFate Incised vessel (E 1195).

There is no implication intended that McFate Incised is related to Susquehannock wares or to the north-eastern Ohio ceramics currently referred to as McFate Incised (though the latter is certainly believed to be the case). Lacking evidence to the contrary, this particular sequence of design application—multiple oblique alternating lines being added prior to the application of the horizontal incised element—may be universal. It is more likely, however, to be an individual or group phenomenon. Conceivably, some other individuals or groups may have produced similar designs by applying the design elements in a different sequence, and this difference might be of sociologic, anthropologic, and even archaeologic significance. More attention should be given to the precise order in which design elements are applied, especially when the sequence is readily determinable by studying overlapping design elements.

These two McFate Incised vessels from the McFate Site display a considerable variation in the degree of workmanship. The smaller vessel is cordmarked with a rather crude, trailed design; the larger vessel is carefully smoothed with a sharply incised, almost “stamped” decoration. This contrast might be due simply to one potter having exercised greater care and craftsmanship in his work. One could postulate that the cruder, cordmarked vessel is from an earlier McFate component, an interesting possibility but one without substantial supporting evidence at the present time. It might as easily be claimed that the cruder vessel represents a stylistic deterioration of “classic” McFate ware and is, therefore, later. The fact is that at present we cannot relate any of these five vessels

temporally, though it is believed that they do not date before A.D. 1300. David S. Brose (1972) has suggested that McFate Incised ceramics from western Pennsylvania, specifically the McFate site, can be distinguished from the Lyman Site ware which I have assigned to McFate Incised by virtue of the neatly “stamped” appearance of the Pennsylvania sherds and the crudely “drawn” nature of the Lyman Site examples. The occurrence of both crudely incised and carefully “stamped” sherds at the same site—both at McFate and at Lyman—suggests rather that we are dealing merely with the vagaries of individual potters or, at best, with slight temporal differences.

The third vessel illustrated from the McFate Site (Fig. 2c) is a small shell-tempered clay “toy pot” (E 351). It is nearly as high (29 mm) as its maximum diameter (37 mm), and is relatively thick, 5-6 mm at the lip. The vessel is smooth surfaced without ornamentation other than a few faint irregular indentations in the lip. These appear to have been carelessly made with a stick or fingertip and may even be accidental. Toy pots found in western Pennsylvania have invariably been placed in the ceramic type “Scarem Plain,” but the presence of shell temper may be used to exclude this particular vessel from that catch-all.

The fourth vessel and the second largest of the five McFate Site vessels (E 461) is a plain, cordmarked globular vessel with an unusually sharply everted rim (Fig. 3a). The vessel is nearly equidimensional, 207 mm high with a maximum diameter of 246 mm. The thickness of the rim, measured at the lip, varies from 4-7 mm. The cordmarking is distinct on most of the vessel but is

partially obliterated on the base. In form this vessel does not differ significantly from several of the plain, "utilitarian" vessels described and illustrated by Mary Butler (1939) from the type Monyock area, notably from the Montague Site (36 So 4), Somerset County. Also, Guthe's Chautauqua Cordmarked ware from southwestern New York does not seem to contain vessels with such a sharply flaring rim, but this may be due to insufficiencies in the sample. A similar vessel, though again without such a pronounced flaring of the rim, has been illustrated from the Lyman Site (Murphy 1971a).

The last vessel illustrated from the McFate Site (Fig. 3b) is grit-tempered with cordmarking over most of the body, though the cordmarking has been obliterated near the rim. The vessel is bowl-shaped with only the faintest suggestion of a neck constriction, and it has a slightly flaring rim. It is 125 mm high with two pointed castellations rising 6 mm higher, and it is 121 mm in diameter.

The castellations occur immediately above two small vertical lug handles. This bowl-like vessel is ornamented by a single series of shallow, rather broad and closely spaced punctates immediately below the flattened lip. Punctate markings are a common design element in many ceramic series, and there is no compelling reason to assign this pot to Mayer-Oakes' Monongahela Punctate type. It is remarkable, however, that this particular use of punctates, limited to a narrow area immediately below the lip and without any further embellishment by incising or decorative devices, can be duplicated in extant collections only by some sherds of "Monongahela Punctate" from the Speers Site (36Wh25), Washington County, Pennsylvania (Mayer-Oakes 1955, pp. 106-107, Pl. 49).

There is no strong evidence to justify continued referral of sites such as McFate and Wilson Shutes to the Monongahela Complex, though it should be emphasized that ceramic relationships of these sites seem to be

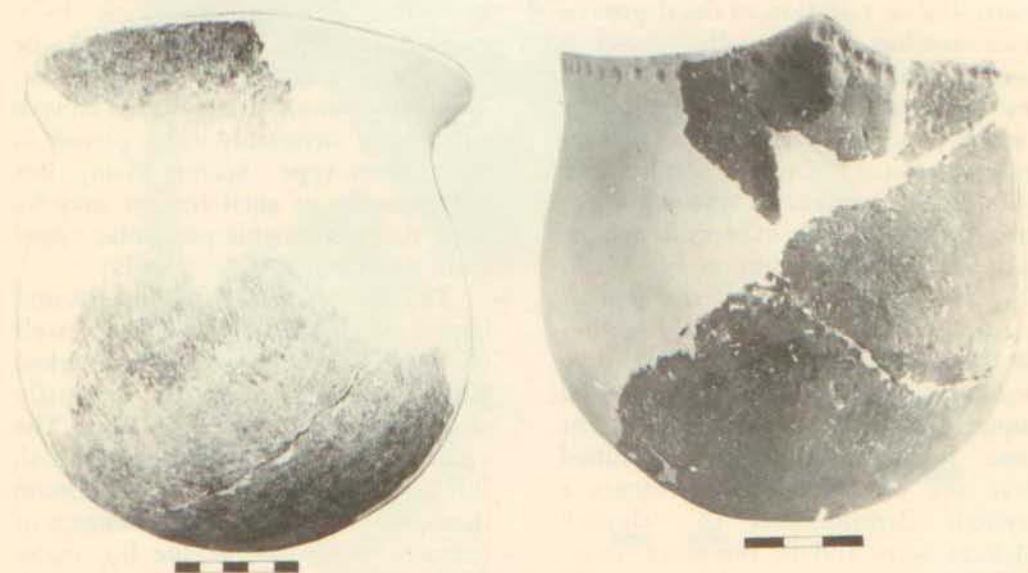


Fig. 3.a-b. (a) shell tempered "utility" McFate vessel and (b) grit tempered vessel similar to Mayer-Oakes Monongahela Punctate ceramic type.

closer to Mononghela ceramics than to those of other neighboring areas. McFate ceramics have little in common with Whittlesey Phase material from northeastern Ohio (Murphy 1971c), and there certainly is little or nothing "Iroquoian" about them. Nonetheless, erection of a distinct, full-blown "McFate Tradition," as has recently been attempted (Johnson 1972), scarcely seems justifiable on the basis of present knowledge. Johnson (1972:12) has observed that "the mere presence of incised pottery in two adjacent areas at approximately the same time does not necessarily argue for the two ceramic complexes being one in the same". But the converse holds true as well; relatively minor differences in one or two ceramic modes scarcely substantiate the existence of distinct ceramic complexes, particularly when the extent and precise nature of these differences have yet to be adequately delineated. Such minor ceramic distinctions can scarcely serve as the basis for distinct ceramic types and certainly do not justify recognition of a new, hypothetically unique, cultural tradition.

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